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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ISLAMABAD 001647

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PK](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: 3,000 WOMEN, A MOSQUE, AND GUNS: A STORY ANY
JOURNALIST WOULD LOVE

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 0625
[1](#)B. ISLAMABAD 0897

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Classified By: Charge Peter Bodde 1.5 (b), (d).

SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

[1](#)1. (C) Fiery headlines in the Pakistani and international press about Islamabad's Red (Lal) Mosque and the adjacent women's madrassah (seminary) could lead readers to believe that talibanization has spread to Islamabad -- or that extremism has appeared suddenly at the Red Mosque. In reality, the Red Mosque and its leaders have been at the center of Islamist ideology for decades. The current controversy will probably be resolved in the next few weeks, and President Musharraf's plan to use religious leaders to educate the public on the problematic nature of the Red Mosque's efforts seems to be working. The President treads a narrow line, though. A misstep leading to the death of a female seminarian could ignite the street. End Summary and Introduction.

THE RED MOSQUE -- NOT NEW TO CONTROVERSY

[1](#)2. (C) Islamabad's Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) and its adjacent women's seminary, Jamia Hafsa Madrassah, are located in Islamabad's section G-6, within a mile of the Diplomatic Enclave and Pakistan's government buildings. Jamia Hafsa is reportedly home to between 2,500 and 3,000 girls and women. The Red Mosque also operates Islamabad's largest men's madrassah, Jamia Fareedia, located near Faisal Mosque, about five miles from the Red Mosque. Jamia Fareedia houses 7,000 boys and men. Pakistan Army officials tell us that President

Zia al Haq chose Jamia Fareedia's location for strategic reasons: within 15 minutes, thousands of madrassah students can take to the streets anywhere in Islamabad.

13. (C) General Zia al Haq was a leading patron of the Red Mosque and was close to the mosque's late leader, Maulana Abdullah. Throughout the 1980s, Abdullah used his authority to encourage jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the mosque was known to be sympathetic to al Qaeda. Unknown assailants assassinated Maulana Abdullah inside the mosque on October 7, 1998. Since then, Abdullah's sons, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi, have run the mosque and its associated madrassahs. According to Embassy contacts, while Maulana Abdullah was relatively well educated and could be progressive on many issues, his sons lack their father's sophistication and nuance.

14. (C) After 9/11, the Red Mosque leadership officially severed links with AQ, though journalists report the brothers' sermons have continued to encourage sympathy for Osama bin Laden. Both brothers reportedly have called for jihad against America and are vocal in their support of the Taliban. According to the press, the brothers were a driving force behind a 2003 fatwa (religious decree) denying Muslim burials to Pakistani army forces killed while fighting in South Waziristan. The mosque also was a center of anti-Western fervor during the 2006 Danish cartoon demonstrations.

RECENT HEADLINES

15. (C) In mid-January, the Capital Development Authority began demolishing mosques built without permits on public land. On January 20, the Development Authority razed Amir Hamza mosque, which was adjacent to the Red Mosque and to Jamia Hafsa, the women's seminary. On January 27, dozens of girls and women from Jamia Hafsa entered a public library next to their madrassah and began a sit-in, demanding that the Government not tear down any part of their madrassah,

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much of which is built illegally on land owned by the Ministry of Education. (Note: As explained in paragraph 14, many women in the madrassah are orphans or widows; they would have nowhere to go if the madrassah were torn down. End Note.) The women later announced other demands, including that the government legalize all 81 mosques the Capital Development Authority had declared illegally built. The women also called for the strict interpretation of Sharia Law in Pakistan. Negotiators from the Ministry of Religion eventually agreed to a compromise on the mosque destruction question, but the women never officially left the library (reftels). While the library is again open to the public, the "sit-in" technically continues.

16. (C) Just as the library controversy dropped out of the news, Jamia Hafsa was on the front pages again on March 27, when a group of students broke into an alleged brothel near the mosque and kidnapped three women and a six-month-old baby. Police entered the seminary to demand the release of the women and baby and to arrest some of the instigators. Students took two police officers hostage. Rumors quickly circulated via text messaging that 7,000 male students from Jamia Fareedia madrassah were on their way to join the 3,000 female students inside Jamia Hafsa, leading the international press to report that 10,000 extremist madrassah students were protesting in downtown Islamabad. In reality, no more than 1,000 male students arrived at the madrassah that night. Police negotiated the release of their colleagues, and two days later the Jamia Hafsa students released the three kidnapped women and the baby. Police have not arrested anyone for the kidnapping.

17. (C) On April 6, the Jamia Hafsa administration announced it would launch a Sharia Court inside the Red Mosque. It was the third time since January the students had called for the

implementation of Sharia Law inside Islamabad. Journalists reported male and female madrassah students patrolling markets and harassing CD and DVD stores, at least for a few hours one day. Embassy employees have not witnessed any such patrols, but journalists tell us they did watch a group of students burning a large number of CDs near a market.

THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY REACTS

¶8. (C) On April 7, President Musharraf told Codel Lowey that the best way to deal with the problems at the Red Mosque was to encourage religious leaders to educate the general Pakistani public on errors in the Red Mosque teachings. Religious scholars, including those known to be opposed to President Musharraf, have been on television nightly since late March criticizing the Red Mosque leadership and arguing that the leadership's behavior is un-Islamic. In March, Wafaqul Madaris, Pakistan's largest seminary oversight organization, revoked Jamia Hafsa's accreditation, a move designed to isolate the Mosque's leaders and to pressure them to reform their teachings. Meanwhile, the religious parties have distanced themselves from the Red Mosque. Liaquat Baloch, Vice-President of the Jama'at Islami, recently announced that no religious party endorsed the madrassah students, actions and that no society would allow citizens to take the law into their own hands.

THE END IS IN SIGHT. . . .AGAIN

¶9. (C) On April 9, PolOffs met with Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, president of the ruling PML-Q. Shujaat had met with Maulana Aziz and Maulana Ghazi on April 7 to broker an end to the tensions. Shujaat presented the brothers with the government's list of demands, to which the brothers were generally amenable. Shujaat believed the brothers were worried they had lost control of the students and that they had damaged their standing in the international madrassah

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community. The brothers, according to Shujaat, were eager to end the crisis and quiet the madrassah.

¶10. (C) The Government's list of demands included:

- Remove all signs of militancy from the mosque, including weapons and banners
- Vacate the library
- No students carrying swagger sticks (baton-like weapons)
- Only legitimate students in the madrassah
- Abolish the Sharia Court
- Stop policing markets
- Remove posters from neighborhood
- Remove the recently erected tent compound for male students who were "guarding" the madrassah
- No interaction with the media

¶11. (C) On April 8, the madrassah presented Shujaat a list of 62 counter demands. According to Shujaat, the list was largely a face-saving measure, as the government already had met most of the requirements. The outstanding demands were, in Shujaat's opinion, not generally objectionable:

- Form a committee to decide all question of mosque demolition. If mosques are demolished, the government should build replacement mosques on other sites.
- Monitor television programming for immoral content; increase the amount of religious programming on television. (Shujaat said that, while the censorship was not possible, the government would consider the religious programming question.)
- Enforce laws against the sale of adult movies.
- Close brothels. Find alternative livelihoods for prostitutes.

¶12. (C) Comment: For months, the conventional wisdom was that sophisticated men were manipulating vulnerable women

inside Jamia Hafsa. The most recent list of demands from the students, though, emphasizes action against pornography rather than all videos and requests government help for former prostitutes. The tone of the list may indicate that the women have begun to assert themselves -- a hypothesis Shujaat accepts. End Comment.

¶13. (C) Shujaat believes the controversy will be over in a matter of days. On April 9, National Security Advisor Tariq Aziz told Charge the situation would be quiet within two weeks.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

¶14. (C) Q: Why don't the girls' parents get them out of that place?

A: Many of the girls and women living in Jamia Hafsa are orphans, widows, divorcees, and other vulnerable women. They entered the madrassah because, in a country with a limited social safety net, they have nowhere else to go. Contacts report that many women in Jamia Hafsa lost their families in the October 2006 earthquake or have been forced to leave FATA for economic or social reasons.

¶15. (C) Q: The press has printed photos of female students in niqab (face covering) carrying rifles. Are the women actually armed?

A: Possibly. Men from Jamia Fareedia have for months been posted on top of the wall that surrounds the women's madrassah. They are not visibly armed, but journalists tell us they have seen weapons inside the complex, in the area where the men are camping. A major proportion of the Jamia Fareedia students are from the Frontier, where owning and

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carrying weapons is a way of life. Rifles are not uncommon in Islamabad; they can be purchased in many markets.

¶16. (C) Q: Why aren't the police enforcing the writ of the state? Shouldn't people be arrested for kidnapping -- or for inciting violence?

A: President Musharraf told Codel Lowey April 7 that he had reason to believe several scores of female students were prepared to commit mass suicide if the police took action against Jamia Hafsa or the Red Mosque. Additionally, it is likely some of the students are armed. In a shoot-out with police, female students might die. Besides being morally unacceptable, Pakistani authorities worry that deaths of female students could cause major street demonstrations throughout Pakistan.

¶17. (C) Q: Are police going to arrest the brothers?

A: Both President Musharraf and Interior Minister Sherpao have told us the Government will arrest Maulana Aziz and Maulana Ghazi for incitement and other crimes. They have not told us when they might arrest the men, nor how they would go about it.

¶18. (C) Q: If the brothers have been inciting hatred for years, why hasn't the government acted?

A: According to the press, at least one brother was arrested in August 2004 for transporting rockets in the trunk of his car. The Religious Affairs Minister eventually arranged his release, in part to maintain inter-religious harmony. While many government officials have reportedly called for the brothers' arrest for years, others have argued that arresting the men would destabilize the street. President Musharraf told Codel Lowey on April 7 that attempting to enforce moderation in Iran had backfired on the Shah. Musharraf preferred to work toward transforming the mindset of the population -- something he admitted would take time.

¶19. (C) Q: The Pakistani press is reporting that talibanization has spread to Islamabad. Is that true?

A: The Red Mosque has been Islamist for decades. It has long attracted students of a certain mindset; many of the current students are from the Frontier, where talibanization is a concern. The presence of those students in Islamabad, though, does not mean Islamabad's citizens are becoming talibanized.

¶20. (C) Q: So is this a big story?

Photos of veiled women posing with AK-47s sell newspapers. Clearly, recent events at the Red Mosque raise serious questions about how the State should enforce its writ. But this is not a new question, particularly in relation to the Red Mosque. Benazir Bhutto's Interior Minister, Aitzaz Ahsan, once ordered the arrest of Maulana Abdullah; the government released him not long after the arrest.

¶21. (C) Comment: As the President knows too well, he is dealing with a situation for which there is no perfect answer. Not acting leaves him open to criticism he is encouraging talibanization; acting precipitously could destabilize the street, not to mention lead to unnecessary deaths. For now, he appears to be proceeding at a measured pace, allowing the tide of public opinion to turn against the brothers' actions before he eventually moves against them.

End Comment.

BODDE